Provisional Selves: Experimenting with Image and Identity in Professional Adaptation

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This article describes how people adapt to new roles by experimenting with provisional selves that serve as trials for possible but not yet fully elaborated professional identities. Qualitative data collected from professionals in transition to more senior roles reveal that adaptation involves three basic tasks: (1) observing role models to identify potential identities, (2) experimenting with provisional selves, and (3) evaluating experiments against internal standards and external feedback. Choices within tasks are guided by an evolving repertory that includes images about the kind of professional one might become and the styles, skills, attitudes, and routines available to the person for constructing those identities. A conceptual framework is proposed in which individual and situational factors influence adaptation behaviors indirectly by shaping the repertory of possibilities that guides self-construction.•

> To learn how to make smart noises about money, I studied the two best Salomon salesmen I knew. . . . My training amounted to absorbing and synthesizing their attitudes and skills. . . . Dash and Alexander were as opposite as individuals as their respective choice of pseudonyms suggests, and their respective skills differed also. . . . The luckiest thing that happened to me during the period I spent at Salomon Brothers was having Alexander take me into his confidence. . . . Thinking and sounding like Alexander were the next best thing to being genuinely talented, which I wasn't. . . . It reminded me of learning a foreign language. It all seems strange at first. Then, one day, you catch yourself thinking in the language. Suddenly, words you never realized you knew are at your disposal. Finally, you dream in the language. —(Michael Lewis, *Liar's Poker,* 1989: 172–175).

The socialization of newcomers to firms and roles has been a topic of great interest to organizational scholars (e.g., Becker and Carper, 1956; Louis, 1980; Oakes, Townley, and Cooper, 1998). As Michael Lewis's story illustrates, in assuming new roles, people must not only acquire new skills but also adopt the social norms and rules that govern how they should conduct themselves (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). These display rules (Sutton, 1991) include a variety of symbolic elements such as the "appropriate mannerisms, attitudes, and social rituals" (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979: 226). Failure to convey impressions or images that are consistent with one's social role not only diminishes one's effectiveness in that role but may also cause the individual to lose the right to enact the role (Goffman, 1959; Leary and Kowalski, 1990). Acting the part, in contrast, facilitates passage through a firm's inclusion boundaries (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979) and gradually produces the internalization of corresponding identities (Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959). Understanding the social and psychological processes by which people construct or modify their professional image and identity thus becomes important.

This article is a qualitative study of junior professionals—consultants and investment bankers—navigating a transition from technical and managerial work to client advisory roles. In their interactions with their clients, they must convey a credible image long before they have fully internalized the underlying professional identity. Professional identity is defined as the relatively stable and enduring constellation of

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attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences in terms of which people define themselves in a professional role (Schein, 1978). A basic assumption is that professional identity forms over time with varied experiences and meaningful feedback that allow people to gain insight about their central and enduring preferences, talents, and values (Schein, 1978); therefore, professional identity is more adaptable and mutable early in one's career. Identity is distinguished from image or persona, terms I use interchangeably, to refer to the impressions people believe they convey to others.[1] People enact personas that convey qualities they want others to ascribe to them, for example, qualities prescribed by their professional roles, such as judgment, business acumen, competence, creativity, and trustworthiness. While some of those qualities may be well-defined aspects of their identities, others may be incongruent with their self-conceptions, and still others remain to be elaborated with experience.

Despite consensus in the socialization literature that identity changes accompany work role changes, the process by which identity evolves remains underexplained. In this article I argue that people adapt to new professional roles by experimenting with images that serve as trials for possible but not yet fully elaborated professional identities. These "provisional selves" are temporary solutions people use to bridge the gap between their current capacities and self-conceptions and the representations they hold about what attitudes and behaviors are expected in the new role. As practical tests of possibilities that can only be clarified with experience, the concept of provisional selves builds on but differs from the notion of possible selves, i.e., individuals' ideas about who they might become (Markus and Nurius, 1986). The study advances the socialization literature by combining ideas about adaptation processes with ideas about identity construction to investigate how possible selves are created, tested, discarded, and revised in the course of career transition.

ADAPTATION TO WORK TRANSITIONS

Socialization researchers have long noted that identity changes accompany career transitions. Because new roles require new skills, behaviors, attitudes, and patterns of interactions, they may produce fundamental changes in an individual's self-definitions (e.g., Becker and Carper, 1956; Hall, 1976; Schein, 1978; Hill, 1992). As situation demands induce people to draw from, elaborate, or create new repertoires of possibilities, aspects of one's professional identity that have been relatively stable may change markedly. Socialization is not a unilateral process imposing conformity on the individual, however, but a negotiated adaptation by which people strive to improve the fit between themselves and their work environment (Schein, 1978; Nicholson, 1984; Ashford and Taylor, 1990).[2] With experience, they improve their understanding of the new role and refine their emerging notions of who they want to be in that role (Bandura, 1977; Weick, 1979). Over time, people adapt aspects of their identity to accommodate role demands and modify role definitions to preserve and enact valued aspects of their identity, attaining a negotiated adaptation to the new situation

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In organizational research, the terms image and construed external image have been used to refer to what members believe outsiders think about their organizations, while the term reputation has been used to refer to what outsiders actually perceive (Dutton and Dukerich, 1991; Dutton, Dukerich, and Harquail, 1994).

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Following Ashford and Taylor (1990), I distinguish adaptation, defined as the process and actions by which people strive to improve the fit between their environments and themselves, from socialization, defined as organizational actions to mold and shape the individuals within them.

(Nicholson, 1984). Identity and role change, therefore, "evolve interactively such that a new synthesis is achieved that is more than simply a compromise of static role demands and static self demands" (Ashforth and Saks, 1995: 173).

The process by which people negotiate, with themselves and with others, what identities they craft as they assume a new work role, however, has received little empirical attention. Current theories of adaptation posit an iterative process in which sensemaking, action, and evaluation tasks are regulated by an interplay of internal and external influences (for reviews, see Nicholson, 1987; Ashford and Taylor, 1990). External influences include job requirements, socialization practices, and available role models (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). But although situations impose demands and suggest models, people interpret and act on these subjectively, as a function of their self-conceptions—who they are and would like to be in the future (Markus and Nurius, 1986). The literature to date, however, has paid scant attention to the role played by self-conceptions during socialization, in particular, how images of desired future selves serve as catalysts for identity development.

Identity Construction and Possible Selves

Identity refers to the various meanings attached to a person by self and others (Gecas, 1982). These meanings, or self-conceptions, are based on people's social roles and group memberships (social identities) as well as the personal and character traits they display and others attribute to them based on their conduct (personal identities) (Gecas, 1982; Ashforth and Mael, 1989). Identities have long been seen as constructed and negotiated in social interaction (e.g., Cooley, 1902; Mead, 1934; Goffman, 1959). People make identity claims by conveying images that signal how they view themselves or hope to be viewed by others. By observing their own behavior as well as the reactions of others, who accept, reject, or renegotiate these public images, they maintain or modify their private self-conceptions (Swann, 1987).

This notion of identity negotiation is closely linked to debates in the literature about the stability or malleability of self-conceptions (e.g., Markus and Kunda, 1986; Markus and Wurf, 1987).[3] This article does not attempt to resolve these debates but, rather, builds on agreement in this literature that status passages such as career transitions provide opportunities for renegotiating both private and public views of the self. One mechanism for identity change that has received a great deal of theoretical attention is the notion of possible selves, defined as ideas about who one might become, would like to become, or fears becoming (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Yost, Strube, and Bailey, 1992).

As images of what end states are desirable and undesirable, possible selves may be expected to figure prominently in adaptation because they serve both as cognitive and emotional filters by which people enact their environments and as incentives for future behavior (Markus and Nurius, 1986). Stated in terms of the adaptation tasks noted earlier, possible selves guide attention in sensemaking, help people select new behaviors for trial, and direct their assessments of

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While the existence of a "true" or immutable self has been the topic of much debate in the literature (e.g., Markus and Kunda, 1986; Markus and Wurf, 1987), and theoretical traditions differ in whether they posit the existence of an internal feeling of personal identity that is distinguished from mere outward appearance, most scholars agree that people have multiple identities that they invoke in different social circumstances and that identities change and adjust in response to challenges from the social environment (Gecas, 1982). Perspectives diverge, however, on the weight they place on individual and situational factors in shaping self-conceptions, as well as whether they view people as capable of interpreting external feedback accurately (Markus and Nurius, 1986; Swann, 1987). A large literature in social psychology, for example, has found consistent support for self-verification, defined as people's tendency to seek evaluations and interaction partners that confirm their self-views (Swann, 1987). Swann (1987) noted, however, that career transitions are times in which people are more prone to modifying their self-conceptions based on their treatment by others.

how well they are doing. In observational learning, they guide social comparison choices and help people develop particularized and individualized guides for action. As concrete knowledge of what is possible and desirable to achieve, they direct attention to certain role models among those available and help people identify what behaviors and attitudes to acquire from them. In experiential learning, when people adopt the demeanor associated with the roles to which they aspire, they are in effect creating possible selves. Finally, possible selves serve as benchmarks for interpreting and judging one's own behavior. They are standards against which people calibrate external feedback and their own affective reactions (e.g., Did I act like the person I want to become?), helping them decide what behaviors to try again, reject, or modify.

Markus and Nurius (1986) argued that possible selves are highly vulnerable to changes in the environment. Yet they did not specify the processes by which possible selves are retained or rejected, nor did they develop ideas about what occurs when people enter situations that challenge them to create new possibilities or to put old ones to public test. In this article I argue that during times of career transition, as people identify role models, experiment with unfamiliar behaviors, and evaluate their progress, they are constructing possible identities. But existing ideas about possible selves do not fully account for the idiosyncrasies of adaptation to unfamiliar roles. Notably, the new identities generated in career transition are often provisional, even makeshift, until they have been rehearsed and refined with experience. Building on well-established notions about role modeling, experiential learning, and possible selves, I investigate adaptation as a process of creating, testing, and refining provisional identities.

METHODS

The perspective developed here is grounded in two qualitative studies of junior consultants and investment bankers undergoing a career transition from analytic (individual contributor) and project management roles to boundary-spanning roles managing client relationships. The purpose of the study was to develop theory and hypotheses about the process of adaptation in career transitions. Since my objective was to generate rather than test theory, the study design was open-ended, to allow unplanned themes to emerge from the data. My interests in image and identity were not fueled by a deductive logic but, rather, by the dominance of these themes in my interviews.

Career transitions in professional service work are particularly suited to exploring identity construction processes because image displays are of such central importance. In any form of customer service work, the ability to convey public images of competence and credibility is critical for three reasons (Ashforth and Humphrey, 1993). First, firm performance depends on professionals' ability to sell their services to clients; because the value of services rendered is relatively intangible and difficult to evaluate according to objective standards, a professional's demeanor strongly affects a client's

perceptions of quality. Second, as representatives of the firm to the client, professionals are expected to embody the firm's identity. Third, what will occur in the course of interaction is often difficult to anticipate, requiring discretion and improvisation by the professional. While these situation demands apply to all client encounters, they are especially challenging for the junior person in transition to such a role for the first time.

Research Context

Firms. This research was conducted in two professional services firms, an investment bank and a management consulting firm. The investment bank was a large securities company that employed about 1000 professionals and provided a full range of financial services, including investment banking, sales and trading of securities, and research. The study focused on its investment banking division.[4] The management consulting firm was a rapidly growing but relatively small elite firm. At the time of the study, it employed approximately 350 professionals. Both firms had extensive international operations with offices worldwide, both were listed prominently in surveys of leading firms in their respective fields, and both recruited exclusively from top-tier business schools.

Work roles and career paths. Investment banks serve as intermediaries between clients and a range of other parties, including investors, other financial services firms, and companies issuing securities or considering their sale or the purchase of another company. In this capacity, they provide a range of advisory services that may include proposals for financial restructuring, identifying companies to acquire or be acquired by, and negotiating, consummating, and financing the transaction, or deal. The work revolves around the project, or deal, e.g., merger, acquisition, divestiture, or security issue. Newly minted masters of business administration (MBAs) begin working at investment banks as associates. In this role, they develop financial models and perform the routine tasks of putting together a deal. These activities include conducting due-diligence work, assembling the books that report the minutiae of a financial transaction, and writing presentations of financial analyses. Four years later, they are considered for promotion to vice president (VP). As vice presidents, they are responsible for managing transactions from beginning to end and coordinating the efforts of relevant internal staff, such as equity researchers, analysts, and sales and trading personnel. In this role, they begin to serve as brokers between their firms and the client, handling day-to-day contact with people at their level at the client firm, managing their junior colleagues, and bringing the senior professional in charge of the engagement into the process on an as-needed basis. At this point, they are expected to begin to cultivate relationships with clients, so that they are able to discern opportunities to sell them on follow-on business. In the seventh or eighth year, the vice president may be promoted to director and, later, to managing director; both these roles consist of client advisory work and require generating new investment banking business for the firms. All promotions are up-or-out decisions; those who are not promoted must leave.

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Investment banks encompass two major functions. The corporate finance, or investment banking, function originates and underwrites security issues and performs mergers, acquisitions, and divestitures. Sales and trading, the second major function, is responsible for the distribution of underwritten securities in primary offerings and for secondary trading of securities. See Eccles and Crane (1987) for more detail on the structure and management of investment banks.

Like investment banks, management consulting firms conduct both project and client advisory work. Management consultants are retained by clients to perform studies and provide advisory services in a range of areas pertaining to their competitive strategy, internal structure, or core processes, such as manufacturing and customer service. Consultants produce research findings, problem diagnoses, change recommendations, and implementation plans.[5] The role progression in consulting firms is similar to that in investment banks. New MBAs are expected to perform analytic work and provide research support to their superiors. Two to three years later, they begin to take on team-leader responsibilities; in this role, they translate the information that is gathered from clients into a problem diagnosis and specific action plans, delegating the analytic work to their junior colleagues.[6] Typically, the neophyte team leader manages one relatively small project, progressing over the next few years to managing larger, more complex, and multiple projects. For strategic guidance, new team leaders rely heavily on senior partners, who conduct key client meetings and presentations; with experience, team leaders are expected to handle an increasing share of both. Three to five years later, team leaders begin to assume more client-oriented responsibilities. As client account managers, they serve as client advisors; they are expected to handle a large share of the client interface and to begin to generate new business. The timetable for a client account manager's promotion to partner depends on the amount of revenues he or she has generated. Unlike the investment bank, the consulting firm I studied did not have a fixed up-or-out system; each promotion decision was tailored to individual capacity, and title changes occurred after the individual had already been working a period of time in that capacity. Those not performing at a level appropriate for their cohort, however, are encouraged to leave.

Preliminary interviews. To familiarize myself with the firms, I began by conducting five open-ended interviews with three senior professionals and two human resource (HR) professionals in the investment bank and three interviews with two senior professionals and one HR professional in the consulting firm. I elicited observations about key success and derailment factors for junior people and career development practices in their firms. In these interviews, the themes of image and identity first emerged. These informants also facilitated the selection of the participants and helped me define the cohorts that would represent the career junctures of greatest theoretical relevance. Based on their observations and the promotion and evaluation criteria summarized in table 1, I decided to investigate the two critical junctures before the partner or director level. In the investment bank, these were the transitions from associate to vice president and from vice president to director. In the consulting firm, the corresponding transitions were from associate to case team leader and from team leader to client relationship manager. In both organizations, the first transition is from an analytic or technical role to a project management role; the second is from project to client management. I combine my analysis of both cohorts, however, because at both levels, performance evaluation criteria include evidence of one's

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See Maister (1993) for more detail on the structure and management of consulting firms.

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While titles tend to be standardized across investment banks, titles at consulting firms vary more widely. To protect the anonymity of the research site, I do not use the firm's exact titles but, rather, labels that are representative of those that are common in similar firms.

Table 1

Examples of Evidence about Role Requirements

Groups	Evidence
Consultants	Archival: Excerpts from performance appraisal forms. Key skills: Discern and interpret client behavior and attitudes; generate critical hypotheses and articulate integrated conclusions; and generate business from existing client and play a support role in generating new business. Display rules: "Viewed by senior client managers as fully competent, mature leader of [firm] engagement and trusted confidante." Interviews with senior informants (N = 8): "People who slow down in their careers are those who tend to be skills-oriented—stylistically, they are not go-getters, or they just don't relate to the client." "We have spectacular team leaders who hit the wall in the transition to account manager. The challenge is to develop productive relationships with clients who are generally older than you. It requires different skills, and it comes as a big shock. You are selling yourself. You are saying, 'For $X million, the project will have my guarantee, my judgment, and my credibility.' " "The ability to 'be the client's friend' is a big hurdle. The hurdle is to realize it: junior people think 'this can't be what they want, they should hire me for my analytical skills.' "
Investment bankers	Archival: Excerpts from performance appraisal forms. Key skills: Corporate finance skills; verbal and written communication; new business skills; commercial sense (acumen with regard to business opportunities); and creativity/innovation (looks for new and better ways to serve clients). Display rules: "Motivated, takes initiative, exhibits enthusiasm and effort"; "displays effective presentation style, appropriate level of poise, presence and selling skills." Interviews with senior informants (N = 8): "We have superb associates who are having trouble making the transition to vice president. A big hurdle is learning to listen to the client instead of trying to force them into a 'right answer' they don't want to adopt. You see that when the CEO says 'I want to do X,' and the person thinks he should do Y and wants to fight to the death for Y. This is an art not a science, there are no right answers." "You are paid to develop a point of view. There are a lot of people who can run a model but not a lot who can develop a point of view." "A good job is expected. To be on the superstar track, you have to be outspoken, brash, self-promoting. . . . You can have people with no eye for details, which are low on substantive knowledge, but are high on promise to originate business. A typical case is someone who isn't a great associate but who you know will make a great officer, because he just lights up the room."

potential to perform in a client management capacity in the future, and those who showed aptitude were permitted to assume a role with clients very early in their careers. Thus, although none of the junior professionals in this study had fully assumed a client management role, they were evaluated not only on their technical and managerial competencies but also on a range of qualities associated with building credibility in their client relationships. As indicated by the comments of senior professionals in both firms, this represents a difficult hurdle, because the transition begins much before juniors have developed the judgment or broad perspective that wins them the confidence of their clients.

Participants. One HR representative and two senior professionals at each firm helped me to compose the participant group. All participants held MBAs from top business schools. For convenience, we limited selection to employees in the central office of each firm (both in the Northeastern United States) and to one other large regional office. In both firms, we sampled people just *before* the identified career transitions (i.e., investment bankers who were to be evaluated for VP or director the year following the study and consultants who had just begun to assume team leader and client manager roles). Participants included 19 management consultants and 15 investment bankers in two cohorts: 6 bankers and 6 consultants in transition to vice president and team leader roles, and 9 bankers and 13 consultants in transition to director and client account manager roles, respectively.

The participant group oversampled women to ensure that the transition experiences of men and women could be compared.[7] Because women are highly underrepresented in both industries, particularly past the associate level, I was not able to draw a random sample of female professionals. Thus, I worked with my informants at both firms to identify the full population of women at each of the two transition points. Almost all the women who met the cohort and geographical criteria were selected, and all but one participated. We randomly selected an equivalent number of men at the same transition points. The final group included 8 women and 11 men from the consulting firm and 7 women and 8 men from the investment bank.[8] In reporting the interview data, I identify participants by assigning them a number and identifying two relevant characteristics: their gender and their firm. The notation [C 3 M], for example, indicates a quote from a male consultant, while [IB 31 F] indicates a female investment banker. The notation "Sr" indicates a senior informant, e.g., [C Sr F].

Apart from their gender, the participants were fairly homogeneous demographically. The investment bankers were all Caucasian Americans, except for a European woman and a Japanese man, both long-time U.S. residents. The consultants included two Indian men and two Asian-American women. All held MBAs from top business schools: Chicago, Columbia, Harvard, INSEAD, Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Northwestern, New York University, Stanford, Wharton, and Yale. The one exception was a woman investment banker who had a J.D. from the University of California at Berkeley. Within their cohort, the participants were all approximately the same age.[9]

Data Collection

I conducted all the interviews in the fall of 1994. Interviews typically lasted 90 minutes, ranging from 60 minutes to over two hours. Approximately half of the participants requested that I limit myself to note taking; in these cases, I took extensive hand-written notes, which I transcribed verbatim at the earliest possible time after the interview, never more than two days later. The remaining interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. The interview questions focused on the key challenges participants perceived in mastering the demands of their current roles and anticipated in moving into the next position, milestones or significant career experiences to date, their perceived strengths and weaknesses, and resources, particularly relationships, that they perceived as having helped them to develop thus far. The Appendix provides the interview protocol.

Data Analysis

Data analysis followed an inductive, grounded theory development process (Glaser and Strauss, 1967; Eisenhardt, 1989; Sutton, 1991). Once I realized that image and identity were such obvious and strong themes in the data, I searched the interview data for categories that reflected similarities across firms and participants on these issues. Three rough categories of behaviors emerged almost immediately: (1) observing role models to identify possible identities, (2) experimenting with one's own image, and (3) evalu-

7
Analyses of gender differences in adaptation experiences are beyond the scope of this paper but are reported in Ibarra and Harrington (1998). Data themes and their implications, however, are noted briefly in the discussion section.

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After participants were selected, three women dropped out of the consulting firm sample; two transitioned to part-time work and one decided to leave the firm. As a result, there were three more men than women in the sample.

9
In the subgroup of investment bankers, associates were 28 to 30 years old and vice presidents between 33 and 36. Among the consultants, team leaders were 27 to 29 years old and client account managers between 29 and 33. One exception, in the more senior consultant cohort, was a woman who was 37 and had taken time off to have children.

ating image and identity based on internal and external feedback. Having identified these rough categories and themes, I used an iterative process of moving back and forth between the data, relevant literature, and my emerging concepts to begin to develop conceptual categories. Following the methods described by Sutton (1991) and Eisenhardt (1989), two research assistants and I compared the emerging model (i.e., observation-experimentation-evaluation), data from the study, and the literature on identity, career adaptation, and professional socialization to guide decisions about the emerging model.

Once the three categories were fairly well elaborated, the two research assistants coded the transcripts for evidence of each; the three of us discussed and resolved discrepancies in coding. Observation behaviors were the easiest to identify and code. These consisted of any description of a role model's skills, styles, and behaviors. Thirty-one of the 34 participants discussed such observations. We coded as experimentation any specific description of attempts to convey a particular kind of image in client encounters. As might be expected, a higher proportion of participants in the more senior group (16/22) described attempting various types of identity claims with their clients than did those in the more junior group (6/12).[10] Evidence of evaluation consisted of comments about how they and others assessed both the kind of image they conveyed and the underlying identity signaled by that image. Twenty-eight of the 34 participants reported image deficiencies, modifications in their provisional strategies, insights about themselves gained from experience, or feedback from others about their self-presentations. Although both groups reported such evaluations, the more senior professional was more likely to do so based on actual client experience, while the more junior one did so in anticipation of a future role.

A second series of iterations between the data and the literature involved a more interpretive set of analyses to sharpen and differentiate the contours of the three categories and to generate new subcategories. For example, in the first iteration I defined the three categories of behaviors monolithically; in later iterations I began to identify patterns of variation across participants in modes of observation and experimentation and in the kinds of feedback on which they based their evaluations. At this point, the idea of adaptation as a process of constructing provisional identities began to emerge, as did the notion that these constructions are guided by an evolving repertoire of possible selves in the new role. Throughout the data analysis process, as new concepts or categories emerged, either from the literature or the data, I searched the other to find evidence of the theme or to refine it conceptually. As the conceptual model became more complete, limitations of the data led me to rely more heavily on the existing literature, using the data to speculate about relationships that await future testing. Table 2 provides a summary of the coding results.

10
Participants who did not discuss experimenting with their image tended to focus instead on technical and managerial challenges associated with their roles.

ADAPTATION AS CONSTRUCTING POSSIBLE SELVES

Study participants were highly cognizant of the need to command credibility with their clients long before they actually

Table 2

Summary of Coding Results

Adaptation behavior	Team leader/ Associate cohort (N = 12)	Account manager/VP cohort (N = 22)	Total participants (N = 34)	
1. Observe role models				
Total coded as observing role models	10	21	31	91%
Total who described display rules (role prototyping)	10	21	31	91%
Total who compared self with role model (identity matching)	6	15	21	62%
Average number of role models	2.0	2.6		
2. Experiment with provisional selves				
Total coded as experimenting with their image*	6	16†	22	65%
Imitation strategies	2	10	12	35%
Wholesale imitation	2	5	7	21%
Selective imitation	0	5	5	15%
True-to-self strategies	2	7	9	27%
3. Evaluate provisional selves				
Total coded as evaluating their image	8	20	28	82%
Self-evaluation	8	15	23	68%
External evaluation	5	19	24	71%

* Two people in the younger cohort and three people in the older cohort were coded as experimenting but did not fall into any of the subcategories.

† Two people reported both true-to-self and wholesale imitation strategies; two reported both wholesale and selective imitation strategies. These participants were coded under each category they reported.

understood and felt competent in their new roles. As a result, issues of how to convey an effective image and define for themselves what kind of professional they aspired to become dominated their descriptions of transition hurdles. Inductive data analyses of their accounts suggest that adaptation involves three basic tasks: observing role models, experimenting with provisional selves, and evaluating results against internal and external standards. The analyses also suggest that participants differed in how they engaged these basic tasks and did not always progress in orderly sequence among them. Rather, participants described engaging in several tasks simultaneously and with different degrees of iteration among observation, experimentation, and evaluation tasks. Further, what they reported learning by observation was not always manifest in their behavioral trials, and feedback did not always lead to modifications in their action strategies.

These patterns directed my attention away from explanations for adaptation behaviors as direct responses to environmental influences. Instead, the data suggest that adaptation is guided by a repertoire of possible selves and corresponding action strategies that people modify to varying degrees with experience. These repertoires include images of feasible, desired, and feared identities in the new role, as well as the actual behavioral tools needed to signal those possibilities, e.g., attitudes, styles, self-presentation tactics, behavioral routines, language, demeanor, and so on.[11] Repertoires are augmented and elaborated as people observe role models and supply the elements needed to construct provisional selves. Early constructions are based on naïve, sometimes discordant perceptions of role requirements and possible selves in the new role. With direct experience, people clarify what images are desirable and increase their under-

11
My use of the term repertoire is similar to Swidler's (1986: 273) notion of toolkits, defined as the repertoires of "habits, skills and styles from which people construct strategies of action." Her term, however, refers to the cultural elements and practices, such as stories, rituals and world-views, that influence action at the societal level.

standing of what elements they can use to create those images. They evaluate identities against internal standards of self-congruence and external standards of appropriateness and modify repertoires accordingly, adding, discarding, or revising the bits and pieces of their possible selves.

Observation: Building a Repertoire of Possible Selves

Thirty-one of 34 participants described how role models displayed the role identity they were attempting to assume. They observed how role models used a diverse set of elements, from their physical appearance and demeanor to their skills and interaction styles, to convey a host of underlying qualities, including judgment, business acumen, competence, personal credibility, and trustworthiness. Through observation, people build a store of tacit knowledge, attitudes, routines, impression management techniques, and so on that they can use in adapting to the new role. The data suggest that building this repertoire involves two processes, role prototyping and identity matching. Table 3 provides examples from the interviews of participants' observations of role models.

Role prototyping. Role prototyping consists of discerning what constitutes a credible role performance. As the quotes in table 3 illustrate, people direct their attention to exemplars, asking "What do they do to project an effective image?" (e.g., "he makes them think he's their friend, and makes people feel he really values them"). By observing successful role models, participants learned tacit display rules and ways of signaling important professional traits. Some focused their observations on behavioral manifestations of underlying traits; others noted the traits themselves. Participants also learned about legitimate variation in ways of enacting the role by comparing and contrasting different models. While some participants relied on one or two role models, others reported watching a broader set. They compared role models' traits and strategies (e.g., "her style is not as slick as [his], she has to work harder"), made inferences about role prototypes and effective deviations (e.g., "he's the consummate consultant"; "she's a non-typical investment banker") and created conceptual categories to organize what they were learning (e.g., "the dimensions are aggressive versus exploratory").

Identity matching. Of the 31 participants who described role prototypes, 21 compared and contrasted role models with themselves, thus elaborating images of their possible selves in the new role. They personalized their observations by directing attention to those elements of role models' behaviors that most matched (or mismatched) their own skills, preferences, inclinations, or values. This identity-matching process, illustrated in table 3, involved making judgments about the feasibility and attractiveness of the role model's behavior. Feasibility judgments entail assessments of whether the modeled behavior might work for them in the near term. Participants questioned, for example, whether behaviors employed effectively by their role models would be feasible for them, given differences in traits such as age, personality, or gender (e.g., "I can't be like him when he says, 'Screw you, you're the client but you're wrong,' He

Table 3

Evidence of Observing Role Models

Processes	Evidence
Role prototyping: What do others do to convey an effective image? What is the range of effective personas?	"J is probably the smartest guy in corporate finance, and he has a reputation, that he deserves, for being smart. He insists on theoretical integrity to the analysis and is very innovative, a guiding light. He's also very colorful, personality wise. A wise guy, with a lot of eclectic interests outside the firm." [IB 21 M] "X is a very non-typical investment banker. . . . Investment bankers tend to be more than outgoing, almost offensive in their outward orientation. She's very quiet, methodical, and organized but very good." [IB 26 F] "X understands why people do what they do. He's direct, honest. [In contrast to Y] he is more personal; there are people who have him on retainer, just have him around to advise them. Y is the closest thing to the consummate consultant, the most complete package. His persona is altruistic, totally confident. . . . Z is more daring and creative, a 'grown-up child.' He'll rap his shoe on the table to make a point." [C 11 M] "X is one of the most sincere people with clients. Her style is not as slick as Y's, she has to work harder. Y doesn't have to prepare to give a great presentation. He's excellent with clients, one of the best. He makes them think he's their friend, and makes people feel that he really values them. Z is brilliant. I admire people who have natural ability. He is also genuine with clients, but not the smoothest. What he says is always high caliber, but he also has to spend more time." [C 6 F] "There is no one [firm] style. You have to watch yourself to see what works with clients. The dimensions are aggressive versus exploratory. On the aggressive end are Directors A, B, C, and D. Directors E and F are in the middle. Director G is exploratory. His approach is process-oriented: 'let me take you on a journey.' " [C 14 M]
Identity matching: Feasibility (Can I pull this off?) Attractiveness (Am I or do I want to be like them?)	"I've been out with X and watched him in action. He's very aggressive in new business—one of the best in the firm. He has a very charismatic personality, which is something you can't teach. I don't think I could really replicate his style. I'm not as outgoing, but I think the attitude and persistence are things that I have." [IB 25 M] "X is the best banker I have ever seen. He understands both the theory and the people, knows how to sell and how to get paid for it. He doesn't hesitate to ask for outrageous fees and get them. But I can't be like him when he says, 'Screw you, you're the client but you're wrong.' " [IB 30 M] "X is excellent with clients, one of the best. I worked with him trying to emulate his style, but it didn't help me. I react negatively to him as a person. Although it's successful, I find it insincere and manipulative. I have to like my role models as individuals." [C 6 F] "K is a role model in the way that he puts his family first and works extremely hard. I don't think I would want to work with someone who is so focused on work that they have no concept of an outside life. J is definitely a role model, one of our best MDs. I have very high standards. I won't associate with people I don't have the utmost respect for." [IB 25 M] "There is a dark side to consulting. You can be the hatchet man, the king-maker. I wonder how to do this with integrity. There are elements of X, Y, and Z's styles that are appealing to me. Others are not—some are sycophants, who tell clients what they want to hear. I'm an iconoclast. I like to say controversial things. Someone like Z has the chameleon-like ability to change himself into what will be attractive to the client." [C 18 M] "I'm more like F, T, and L, substance-oriented, deeply analytical [in contrast to] H, who is flamboyant. T is soft-spoken, but compelling. That's how I would like to be." [C 12 M]

has a very charismatic personality, which is something you can't teach. I don't think I could really replicate his style."). Participants also matched role models based on their attractiveness—the extent to which they shared or admired the characteristics underlying the model's behavior (e.g., "I think the attitude and persistence are things that I have"; "I find [his behavior] insincere and manipulative"; "He is soft-spoken, but compelling. That's how I would like to be."). They evaluated role models, deciding whether or not they wanted to be like them in the future, i.e., whether the role model represents a desirable possible self or, instead, a self they feared becoming (e.g., "There is a dark side to consulting. You can be the hatchet-man, the king-maker. I wonder how to do this with integrity."). Some participants found matches while others did not; some reported both matches and mismatches.

By role prototyping, people add ingredients to their repertoires for possible selves that are defined externally, by the organization and role incumbents. By identity matching, they personalize their repertoire, i.e., select certain models as ex-

emplars of desirable or undesirable possible selves and mark certain routines for more or less likely successful adoption. Framed in terms of building a repertory of possibilities, the observation task entails assembling a diverse set of elements for potential use in the future (Weick, 1993). In role prototyping, participants differed in the number and diversity of role models they observed. In identity matching, they differed in whether they gauged the attractiveness of a role model as a holistic package of traits, abilities, and values (e.g., "I have to respect my role models as individuals.") or, instead, whether they extracted distinct elements from different models piecemeal (Gibson, 1996). Variation in the number of models observed, the diversity of identities among them, and whether possible identities were catalogued in a holistic or piecemeal way affected the variety of the repertoire at their disposal when participants began to experiment with provisional selves.

Experimenting with Provisional Selves

The process of acquiring behavioral skills, such as learning an effective professional style, is different from learning factual knowledge in that behavioral skills must be refined and perfected experientially (Bandura, 1977). As one participant noted, "40 percent is seeing [what senior people do], 60 percent is mustering the courage to try it yourself" [C 19 M]. Of the 22 participants who described their experiments, five reported assuming the role with natural aplomb (e.g., "Being a consultant is all second nature to me, maybe due to my legal training. Client interaction is straightforward. I've always gotten along well with clients. My style is formal, serious and aloof. It works with the clients I have" [C 13 M]) or simply reported what kind of image they tried to convey to their clients. The remainder, however, reported trial-and-error attempts to forge a more effective image. As illustrated in table 4, these fell into two broad categories, which I labeled imitation and true-to-self strategies.

Imitation strategies. The most prevalent form of experimentation reported by participants was imitation. The data suggested two distinct forms of imitation: wholesale and selective. Wholesale imitation refers to experimenting strategies in which the junior person mimics the self-presentation style of a single role model, holistically, without much adaptation. Selective imitation refers to experiments in which the junior person emulates distinct traits or behaviors selected from a broader array of role models, choosing bits and pieces from different people to create a customized model.

Those using wholesale imitation tended to mimic their most proximate or salient role models, typically the senior person with whom they had worked most closely to date. The second quote in table 4 illustrates wholesale imitation well. This junior consultant had developed a role prototype for effective client interaction based on his boss's "aggressive" persona but found that he "overcompensated by being arrogant with the client." Rather than searching for or selecting an identity match, the participant constructed a provisional self based on stylistic elements borrowed from this model but that did not fit his own natural inclinations. In other cases, participants created a provisional self based on mannerisms and

Table 4

Evidence of Experimenting with Provisional Selves

Imitation strategies	Evidence
Wholesale imitation: Adopts persona from role models without much adaptation.	"I feel I have a lot to learn from Z. He doesn't script this out but gives me enough so I really feel like I can just go in there and repeat what he said and feel confident that it was the right thing to do." [C 4 F] "My whole perspective has been flipped around. My natural style has been passive and laid back: 'Tell me what to do and I'll do it.' To compensate for that, I thought I had to be aggressive. My model was a director who is very direct with his clients. His approach is 'let me tell you. . . .' But I overcompensated by being arrogant with the client. I was not open to exploring what the client believed, nor did I show I cared about their response. . . . [This style] didn't fit with who I am, but I thought my normal approach wouldn't be effective here." [C 8 M] "When I started out, I was doing it like the person who taught me, then I developed my own style. The person I emulated is Director X. I followed him around, watched him on all his accounts. . . . He is very laid back in his style with clients. Not aggressive, almost not asking for the business. My tendency was to be laid back as well. It fit me, but I needed to be more assertive. . . he gets the business that way but he already has the relationships." [IB 23 F]
Selective imitation: Adapts elements of several role models' personas to create a new synthesis.	"There are a good half-dozen to a dozen senior people I'd view as mentors. I think up until director, you're building your skills, you're trying on different styles, like different clothes, almost. You try and figure out what styles fit your personality and fit what you're good at. And then that's how you should try to go after business." [IB 25 M] "I can't talk about some sport I'm not interested in. But you have to be able to talk to clients in an informal setting. That is something I'm still working on. . . . You learn different styles from your colleagues. I looked at X's style and Y's style when he deals with institutional investors. So you just have to do it. I pick up some of the ways they would negotiate and develop my own style. Obviously I can't do exactly what X or Y does." [IB 24 M] "I have learned a lot about client interaction by seeing other people do it and then trying it myself. My preference is to have a large set of people as models, rather than a close few. A mosaic of different people. In each situation, I look to what I can learn from that person that I don't know now. G is a rising star who was useful on how to have the guts to confront senior people, H for getting clients to focus on the critical issues, F for one-on-one client interactions." [C 19 M]
True-to-self strategies: Relies on internal models, familiar elements, and own style.	"I'm [creative, argumentative, demanding] with people at [my firm]. With clients, I can get more careful, measured, I joke around less, I'm less speculative. . . . You have to develop your own style, to discover it for yourself. I can't model myself on anyone." [C 7 F] "I've been making progress on it, but it's been slow. I'm reserved and shy walking into new client situations. I have trouble making a presence right from the start, getting noticed and getting them to focus on the issues. It's easier to be forceful with people I have known for a long time. Now, I focus more on the substance of what I want to get across. I'm very analytical and data driven. I don't tend to step out on a limb." [C 15 F] "I work to set the right first impression with clients by preparing very well for our meetings. I'm knowledgeable about their industry and come in with some valuable things to say. Over time, I work to develop more of a relationship, so they value my expertise, not some signal of value—how I present myself, what clothes I wear, how I speak, do I give a slick presentation." [C 6 F]

routines acquired from senior people they perceived as similar to them but whose approach they failed to tailor sufficiently to their own circumstances. Similarity did not guarantee constructing a satisfactory image because the senior model was inevitably different from the junior participants on other dimensions such as age and experience (e.g., "he gets the business that way, but he already has the relationships.").

Participants were well aware of the limitations of wholesale imitation strategies. As one explained, wholesale imitation is a provisional measure to be modified and improved upon with experience: "There are many people who seem to have become the person they work for. They model themselves totally on the senior person. It's probably a good temporary device. As you get more confident you may be able to put in more of yourself. You eventually arrive at something that works" [C 7 F]. This more sophisticated, second form of mimicry, which I labeled selective imitation, involves selecting bits and pieces of skills and styles acquired from multiple role models and combining these with one's own to craft a

more self-tailored persona. The first quote illustrating the selective imitation strategy in table 4 is a good example of this strategy of "trying on different styles, like different clothes, almost." As the quotes in table 4 show, people using selective imitation strategies have more varied repertoires at their disposal, assembled from a greater number and diversity of models and possible selves than those using wholesale imitation. The resulting identities are provisional, however, in that they have yet to be refined with experience and internalized as enduring aspects of a coherent professional identity.

True-to-self strategies. The second form of experimenting with provisional selves described by participants was characterized by a dominant concern with authenticity, defined as the degree of congruence between what one feels and what one communicates in public behavior about one's character or competence (McIntosh, 1989: 1). This theme was manifest in strong claims about the importance of "being yourself," expressions of disdain for "faking it," and a refusal to use imitation to improve their effectiveness in the new role. References to caution and modesty were frequent in their descriptions; acutely aware of their limitations, participants using true-to-self strategies avoided pretension or exaggerated displays of confidence, for example, trading the possibility of a good first impression with a client for credibility over the long term. Related to this theme was a focus on substance over form: "I work to develop more of a relationship [with clients], so they value my expertise, not some signal of value—how I present myself, what clothes I wear, how I speak, do I give a slick presentation" [C 6 F]. Rather than trying out unfamiliar behaviors and unpracticed routines, these participants clung to their old role identities, attempting to transfer to the new role some of the styles, skills, and behaviors they had perfected in earlier, more junior roles. Typically, they relied on their technical and analytic skills to craft a "well-prepared" provisional self, as exemplified by the second quote illustrating true-to-self strategies in table 4. Although this consultant reported "making progress," she was still uncomfortable with the role. Despite the priority accorded to authenticity, these strategies were provisional in two regards. First, although acting in congruence with their feelings of immaturity and inexperience in the new role, these participants experienced discordance between their current and ideal selves. They hoped to overcome their hesitancy in expressing themselves with clients and thus improve their ability to convey their "true competence and character." Second, as discussed further below, their bias in favor of existing routines over new alternatives limited the growth of their repertoires, providing a meager store of material and experience base from which to select and retain possibilities.

By experimenting with provisional selves, participants in this study put to practical test their repertoire of possibilities. Some fashioned provisional selves from repertoires of styles and tactics that felt familiar and authentic but were clearly inappropriate for the new role; others tried out provisional selves based on unpracticed repertoires or fashioned from elements they perceived as discordant with either salient

self-conceptions or desired selves. Yet others combined familiar and unfamiliar, self-generated and borrowed elements to form a unique amalgam. Whichever strategy chosen, most attempts were provisional. By rehearsing these clumsy, often ineffective, sometimes inauthentic selves, they learned more about the limitations and potential of their repertoires and thus began to make decisions about what elements to keep, refine, reject, or continue to search for.

Evaluation: Assessing and Modifying Possible Selves

Adaptation to new roles depends not only on vicarious and experiential learning but also on mechanisms that allow individuals to evaluate results and consider alternative courses of action. Identity construction is not just a process of producing possible selves but also one in which people select and discard the possibilities they have considered (Yost, Strube, and Bailey, 1992). Twenty-eight of the 34 participants reported using internal and external feedback to evaluate provisional selves and make decisions about what possibilities to retain. People conduct internal assessments by comparing their public persona with their representations of the kind of person they "really" are or would like to be; conclusions about what selves to keep or reject depend on feelings of congruence or authenticity. External assessments are the observations and reactions of role-set members who offer explicit or implicit feedback to the junior professional about what gap exists between the current persona and a role-appropriate identity; decisions about what possibilities to retain hinge on whether provisional selves secure the person validation as full-fledged role occupants by those around them. Internal and external evaluations help people make corrective adjustments to their action strategies so they can eventually reduce discrepancies among their private self-conceptions, the behaviors that define a successful role performance, and the images they project in public as they perform the role. Table 5 provides examples from the interviews of participants evaluating their provisional selves. In the last example of internal assessments in table 5, a participant reports that he has realized that the witty possible self with which he had experimented is never going to be his "mainstay" for performing the role. In the second example in that section, a participant is struggling to discard a fact-based self, constructed in her previous role, to forge a new identity as an effective client advisor.

Internal evaluations. The most dominant theme in the participants' self-evaluations was the degree of congruence between their provisional constructions and conceptions of the kind of professional they were and aspired to be. Congruence is important because self-presentations that can be justified as representative of the self are more likely to be internalized than those that clearly contradict private self-beliefs (Schlenker and Trudeau, 1990). As Markus and Nurius (1986: 958) noted, possible selves have an affective component that people use to evaluate their actions, and "to the extent that individuals can or cannot achieve particular self-conceptions or identities, they feel either positively or negatively about themselves." This argument is consistent with the notion that emotive dissonance results from discrepancies between what people really feel and the images they are

Table 5

Evidence of Evaluating Provisional Selves

Type of evaluation	Evidence
Internal assessments	"I can distill all the complexity [concerning the case itself], put it together, and march through it. But I am not going to get up there and entertain the client with great wit. Is that a weakness? I need to develop some of those skills, but it's not going to be a mainstay of my repertoire. I'm confident in the person I've become and that it will play reasonably well." [C 10 M]
	"In terms of my development, I have a huge hurdle in transitioning from seeing myself as 'the one who knows all the facts' to being an advisor to the client. It's like my whole basis for existence is cut away if I can't rely on having read more than everyone else, having looked at the analysis and understood all the points of view." [C 4 F]
	"I've always been a little more reserved. I am becoming more aggressive. Part of it is learning that your instincts are good and that you should go with them." [IB 32 M]
	"I was not open to exploring what the client believed, nor did I show I cared about their response. It was enlightening—and depressing—to see evidence that I did this. It didn't fit with who I am, but I thought that my normal style wouldn't be effective here. I realized it was better to stick to my normal style, but modify it slightly. My perception of myself is changing. It's scary and painful but I'm learning a lot." [C 8 M]
	"My style is creative. I get lots of ideas, I'm argumentative, demanding. With clients, I can get more careful, measured, I joke around less, I'm less speculative. This is the critical thing for me to crack right now. Where on the continuum between my joke-cracking, beer-guzzling, speculative party-animal, argumentative, stubborn, do-things-my-own-way, at-the-extreme, anarchic self that I am with my colleagues at [the firm] and the rigid, careful, calculated persona I have when I'm less comfortable is the best range for my clients, is the right place to be?" [C 7 F]
External assessments	"At the end of my first year as a vice president, the feedback to me was, 'your technical skills are great, now think more innovatively, seize the ball, be more aggressive in your client meetings.' I think what they really wanted was for me to start thinking like a partner, to be the senior guy, not the adjunct to someone else—to try to be a bigger presence." [IB 32 M]
	"When people started saying, 'I assumed you were a VP,' then I knew that I was already performing at a higher level. I felt comfortable. When the title came it was a natural switch." [IB 31 M]
	"His style fit me, but I needed to be more assertive. He gets business that way, but he already has the relationships." [IB 26 F]
	"I don't have an aggressive personality. I have been told I need to improve. I have adjusted to it by becoming more assertive over time. Just watching P was good. She is very vocal, asks lots of questions, always makes sure she has a point to make, is very assertive. Now I do like she does." [IB 23 F]
	"The advice you get is difficult to operationalize when you work with someone who is so different stylistically. The advice I've gotten has been general, along the lines of 'continue to develop your confidence.' I feel like I've been out there on my own, without a lot of guidance or models of how to do it." [C 7 F]
	"[Z's always giving me] all these little suggestions around how to improve client presence and real-time feedback. He really takes time to talk you through things and get to know you, much more so than considerably less senior people I work with. . . . I feel like I have more of a connection with him than I have to other people." [C 4 F]

obliged to convey as role occupants (Rafaeli and Sutton, 1989). In the fourth example of internal assessments in table 5, imitation led a consultant to deviate from his sense of self to a degree that depressed him. The emotions he described were the result of a discrepancy between his behavior and self-conceptions or, possibly, a convergence between his behavior and a "feared self" as a professional who only aims to impose predetermined solutions on clients. The emotive dissonance he experienced provided an evaluative context for rejecting the aggressive possible self he had rehearsed and motivated him to modify his strategy (i.e., instead of mimicking his boss, he will modify his natural style slightly).

Participants using true-to-self strategies, by contrast, tended to report different kinds of emotive dissonance. Inhibitions experienced in client interactions prevented them from displaying their "true" character and competence. The final quote illustrating internal assessments in table 5 is a good example of this dissonance. Negative emotions stem from this consultant's inability to convey an image that is consis-

tent with a salient self-conception as an outspoken person. Her unsatisfactory experience with a "rigid" provisional self, however, has not yielded ideas about a substitute image and identity. She attributed her slow progress in modifying her repertoire to a scarcity of plausible role models, a view of herself as person who does not easily adopt traits borrowed from others and, as discussed below, inadequate external feedback about how to modify her image. With repetition, she may have begun to internalize, and others have come to expect, a cautious or hesitant client persona.

External evaluations. Markus and Nurius (1986: 956) observed that "having a self implies the ability to rehearse possible courses of action depending on a reading of the other person's reactions and then being able to calibrate one's subsequent actions accordingly." Others' reactions shape the evolution of identity in two primary ways: by validating (or failing to endorse) new behaviors and by providing feedback about how to improve. External parties also confer identity by providing social signals about who one is becoming. By gauging others' reactions to their behavior, people learn more about who they are and who they want to be (Goffman, 1959; Markus and Nurius, 1986). Particularly when a professional identity is not yet fully developed, others' reactions lead junior members to come to think of themselves in new terms and begin to act and feel accordingly: "When people started saying 'I assumed you were a VP,' then I knew I was already performing at a higher level. I felt comfortable. When the title came it was a natural switch" [IB 31 M].

Acting on positive feedback produces gradual changes in identity because people replicate the behaviors that win them approval (Weick, 1979; Dutton and Dukerich, 1991). Negative external feedback, however, did not consistently motivate a change in strategy. Rather, participants' reports of their reactions to external evaluations suggest that identification processes mediate the relationship between feedback and response (Foote, 1951). For example, as illustrated in table 5, participants were frequently told to "be more aggressive" or "act with more confidence." Although this type of feedback was common, whether it was understood, internalized, or acted upon appeared to depend on the affective relationship between giver and receiver. The last two quotes in table 5 illustrate a contrast in the kinds of social bonds within which feedback was given. While one consultant laments, "I feel like I've been out there on my own, without a lot of guidance or models of how to do it," the other describes a positive and productive relationship: "I feel like I have more of a connection with him than I have to other people." As Van Maanen and Schein argued (1979: 234), the success of informal socialization processes are highly contingent on the development of affective bonds, and "when there are few affective bonds, the socialization process may break down." Identification with role models infuses behavior with meaning, goals, and purposes (Foote, 1951), providing a motive for people to change their own behavior. By identifying with role models, people begin moving from compliance with display rules to assimilating role requirements as part of their professional identity (O'Reilly and Chatman, 1986).

The need to find role models with whom they could identify, however, only became salient for some participants after receiving feedback on the need to improve their image. At the start of the transition, their role modeling choices were somewhat constrained by their previous work assignments. They had the most exposure to those with whom they had worked directly on client engagements, in particular, those seniors who attended client meetings with them. As they evaluated provisional selves, they became aware of a need to find more feasible or appealing models and thus began to extend their role-model set. An investment banker who is quoted in table 4 [IB 23 F] used an imitation strategy based on her boss, who was similar to her in his "laid back" style but was not able to "get the business" with this style because she did not have the established client relationships that he had. To develop a more assertive repertoire, she turned to a different role model, like her in gender but different in style.

Guided by internal and external evaluations, people add to and discard elements from their repertoires, as well as modify the underlying possible selves those elements represent. While repertoires clearly reflect the influence of situational and individual antecedents (e.g., available role models, existing self-conceptions, past experiences), they are dynamic entities that evolve as people encounter new challenges in their environment. Internal and external responses impel more refined observation and experimentation processes, producing corresponding refinements in the professional's identity and role enactment (Ashforth and Saks, 1995). Over time, with feedback loops among tasks, people expand and refine their repertoires and eventually attain a negotiated adaptation that is neither conformity to rigid role requirements nor changing role requirements to fit a stable, unitary self.

DISCUSSION

This study explored the process of constructing a professional identity that is credible with important role-set members and congruent with one's self-concept as the central task of professional adaptation. The qualitative analyses revealed a three-task model of adaptation that included observing role models, experimenting with provisional selves, and evaluating results according to internal standards and external feedback. Performance of these tasks both depends on and modifies a repertoire of possible selves and images that serve as signals of those selves. The notion that experimenting with possible selves is an important way actors acquire identities is consistent with some well-known ideas about occupational socialization and how the self is constructed in social interaction. The results of this study support this claim but also suggest some important new directions for theory and research.

The present investigation contributes to socialization research by joining a recent stream of work that draws attention to the role of individual agency in constructing self-tailored identities, within the constraints of well-defined occupational norms (e.g., Fine, 1996; Van Maanen, 1988).

Fine (1996), for example, argued that prevailing notions of dominant occupational identities do not capture the considerable diversity of ways in which people make sense of, and display, who they are at work. His study showed that cooks pick and choose among "bundles of images" or repertoires of occupational rhetorics to define their work and identity and respond to the needs of different situations. He called for greater empirical attention to "situated differentiation," or variation, in how people construct a sense of self in role. This study extends these ideas by showing how self-conceptions produce idiosyncrasies in the kind of repertory that is developed in socialization. Further, most discussions of informal socialization emphasize a flow of influence from senior to junior members (e.g., Van Maanen and Schein, 1979). The analysis presented here, by contrast, reveals the active role played by the junior person in enacting the informal environment by devoting greater attention to certain seniors and revising role-model choices on the basis of personal experiment and feedback.

This analysis of how possible selves are selected and rejected during career transition also advances basic ideas about the evolution of identities. In summarizing the literature to date, Yost, Strube, and Bailey (1992: 110) concluded that, "although we know *what* the self becomes, we lack an understanding of *how* the self becomes." The notion that identities crafted in the early stages of adaptation are provisional constructions that must be revised with experience suggests characteristics of the self-construction process that have been relatively neglected. I argued that adaptation requires people to create and become more facile with a repertoire of resources from which they construct diverse self-presentation strategies. Experience may lead a person to discard a specific combination of self-presentation tactics, as well as the underlying possible self those tactics represent, yet he or she may use some of those tactics in different combinations in the future to construct alternative identities. The concept of an adaptation repertory, therefore, extends current thinking by accommodating both stability and change in identities. These ideas have broader links to a range of situations in which continuity and change exist in dynamic tension, confronting people with the challenge of learning "how to accomplish their identity amidst a new set of threats" (Weick and Westley, 1996: 448).

Explaining how and why people change as they navigate career transitions necessarily raises fundamental questions about the generative mechanisms and sequences of events that unfold in these changes. Ideas about the nature and role of adaptation repertoires might be developed further using recent metaphors for change, such as improvisation and bricolage (Weick, 1993). These metaphors share the notion of making do with whatever materials are at hand; they also emphasize a process characterized by an increasing familiarity and aptitude with available materials that allows for innovative combination. Such a view of adaptation focuses research attention on conditions and action strategies that create variety in possible selves and affect what elements are practiced and eventually incorporated into a more enduring repertory.

Implications for Future Research

A wide range of theories about learning and adaptation posit that change occurs by way of iterative cycles of generating, selecting, and retaining variation (Campbell, 1965; Weick, 1979). Applying these ideas to identity change, Yost, Strube, and Bailey (1992) proposed that self-development is an evolutionary process that involves the generation of variation in the self and the selection or rejection of those selves that are proposed. This view implies that a successful process, as defined by outcomes such as speed and ease of adaptation, incorporates adequate mechanisms for both increasing and reducing variety. Although the data presented here cannot be used to ascertain how different forms of observing models, experimenting with possible identities, or evaluating results affect repertoire contents, the analyses suggest some promising directions for further study. Quality and variety of observations, radicality of experiments, and salience or clarity of feedback potentially count among the mechanisms that explain what variety in possible selves is produced and selected in the course of adaptation.

Variety creation. Observation and experimentation strategies differed by the degree to which they increased the variation in junior professionals' established repertoires. People who attended to a greater number and more diverse set of models created a broader set of possible selves to guide future actions. Likewise, people guided by selective (i.e., piecemeal) rather than holistic role-modeling strategies not only added greater diversity to their repertory of attitudes, behaviors, and self-presentation styles, but also greater capacity to arrange these elements in different combinations. The broader the repertory, the greater the likelihood of trying out innovative responses and, thus, the increased chance of gaining the self- and role knowledge on which further development of one's repertoire depends. This proposition is consistent with the evolutionary theory tenet that "the more numerous and the greater the heterogeneity of variations, the richer the opportunities for advantageous innovation" (Campbell, 1965: 28). Yet it extends this idea to self-construction processes by specifying how role modeling serves as a variation mechanism and by suggesting that certain forms of observation and experimentation, among those identified empirically, are more likely to increase repertoire variety and thus increase the likelihood of successful adaptation.

Variety retention. Junior professionals differed in the adequacy of the provisional solutions they crafted as well as in the speed and ease with which they found alternatives. Some described how their experiments and feedback stimulated further, more refined loops in the adaptation process: failed experiments led them to observe different models or to observe the same with greater sophistication; experience also led them to try different experiments, based on alternative possible selves. For other participants, by contrast, negative evaluations did not result in behavioral or repertoire changes. They described slower or even interrupted feedback loops, as they persisted in enacting ineffectual provisional selves for which they saw no substitute. The themes

of affect and emotion, prevalent in the data on internal and external evaluation, suggest hypotheses about what leads people to discard or retain provisional selves.

Arguments that affect plays a key role in guiding the retention of possible selves (e.g., Marcus and Nurius, 1986; Yost, Strube, and Bailey, 1992) and affective bonds between socializing agents and new members facilitate the development of professional identity (e.g., Foote, 1951; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979; Kram, 1988) are not new. But the benefits of modeling styles and behaviors that do not feel very self-congruent have not received much empirical attention. The emotive dissonance reported by some participants using imitation strategies (e.g., feelings of inauthenticity) provided clear and immediate feedback concerning the inadequacy of provisional selves and motivated a renewed search for images that better fit self and situation. By contrast, participants using true-to-self strategies were less likely to experience the unpleasant emotions provoked by "faking it" and, as a result, were slower to discard provisional selves that were clearly inadequate for meeting new role requirements. Similarly, emotional reactions to external feedback differed depending on the nature of the relationships within which it was communicated. In the context of meaningful professional relationships, advice and suggestions from role-set members helped the junior member adjust and calibrate his or her identity construction strategies; without some degree of identification, juniors were less likely to assimilate information that challenged their self-views or preferred adaptation strategies. Feedback that is clear, vivid, and salient at an emotional level, therefore, may play a critical role in helping the individual to narrow the search for an identity that suits the situation and can be incorporated into a more enduring sense of self.

Individual and situational antecedents. Both individual and situational antecedents are expected to affect the repertoire of possible selves with which a person initiates a transition and serve as sources of opportunity and constraint as people make explicit and implicit choices along the course of adaptation. Relevant individual factors include the preexisting set of skills, talents, preferences, past experiences, and self-conceptions that a person brings to the work transition. Previous research indicates that attributes such as learning styles, self-monitoring, and desire for feedback account for variation in responses to socialization, in particular, the extent to which people innovate or conform when confronted with the demands of a new role (Nicholson, 1984; Bell and Staw, 1989; Ashford and Taylor, 1990). Future studies might explore how individual characteristics influence adaptation by their effect on choices among the action strategies identified here (e.g., use of imitation vs. true-to-self strategies).

Relevant situational factors include role requirements such as display rules, socialization practices, and available role models. While previous work specifies what attributes of roles, transitions, and socialization practices account for variance in degrees of personal and role change (Van Maanen and Schein, 1979; Nicholson, 1984, 1987), contextual characteristics that might explain variance in response to the same transition have been underinvestigated. Although my data do

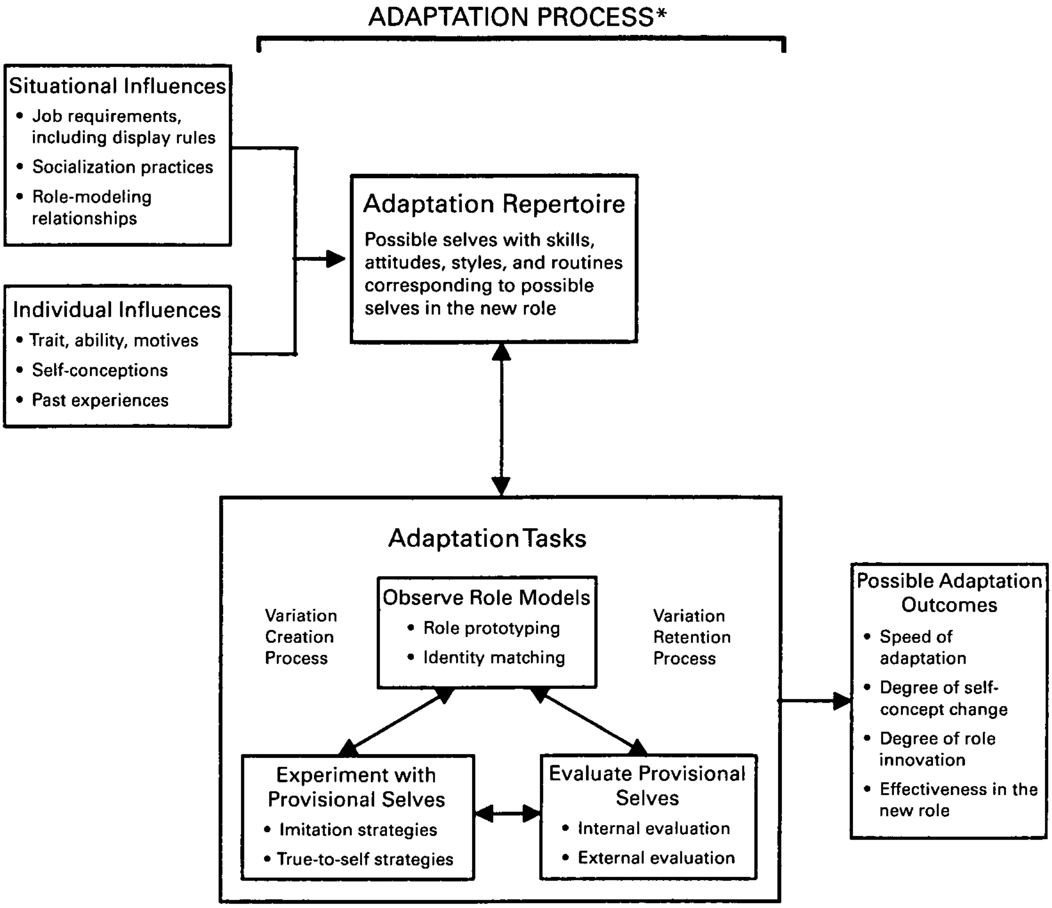
not permit a more systematic analysis, the findings suggested that people's experience of transition varied depending on characteristics of their role-modeling relationships. Linking these findings to the literature on social networks suggests that role-model sets may be conceptualized as networks that shape the quantity and content of possible selves created and tested in adaptation. Extending the ideas proposed above, different network characteristics may be important for creating and retaining variation in possible selves. A broad and diverse network of role-modeling relationships that evolves with experience and feedback may promote the development of a varied repertory and more radical experiments. Analyses of the evaluation task suggested, by contrast, that the retention of possible selves might hinge on the closeness of relationships with people from whom participants borrow elements of their persona and on whom they rely to calibrate internal and external feedback.

Organization demographics, work structures, and culture obviously make certain types of models and relationships more readily available or desirable than others. The scarce representation of women in the senior ranks of both firms, for example, constrained women's ability to find feasible or attractive identity matches in observation and likely accounts for the fact that the true-to-self subgroup was almost entirely composed of women. But both men and women exercised discretion in their choice of models within the available set. Some cast their role-model net wider than others and learned from models who differed from them in salient ways; others focused their attention on one or two proximate models and, without an identity match, found it difficult to learn. Participants also differed in the affective quality of their role-modeling relationships as well as in the extent to which they modified their role-model set with feedback on their progress. Consistent with previous studies of networks and organizational careers (e.g., Podolny and Baron, 1997), this analysis suggests that adaptation is facilitated by networks that include both a core of close ties premised on similarity and identification as well as a broader set of more distant relationships that may lack an affective quality but expose the individual to new, even unanticipated possibilities.

In his classic work, Lieberman (1956) noted that new reference groups bring about new frames of mind, interests, attitudes, and self-conceptions. This theme of connection between networks and identities is prevalent in the socialization literature but has not been investigated empirically in organizational research (e.g., Foote, 1951; Van Maanen and Schein, 1979; Stryker, 1987; Barley, 1989). Propositions about how network characteristics affect adaptation repertoires and behaviors may be formalized by using established social network constructs, such as the number and diversity of models, the emotional closeness of relationships, and the extent to which models share with the focal individual salient social and personal characteristics (see Marsden, 1990). Networks, however, are not static inputs to the adaptation process but, rather, evolve in concert with experience and identity changes. Future studies might build on this research to investigate the coevolution of networks

and possible selves as mechanisms that regulate links and iterations among adaptation tasks.

Figure 1. The adaptation process.



*The bracketed portion of this model corresponds to the empirical study reported in this paper. Categories outside the bracketed ones represent suggested directions for future research.

The results of this study suggest the rudiments of a conceptual model, which is depicted in figure 1, and several promising directions for future research in this area. The model suggests that the adaptation process is characterized by iterative cycles of observation, experimentation, and evaluation. Performance of these tasks varies by individual and is guided by an adaptation repertory that expands and contracts as the process unfolds. These repertoires mediate the relationship between situational and individual influences, on one hand, and identity-construction processes, on the other. Future research is needed to discern how characteristics of antecedents and identity-construction strategies affect the creation and retention of possible selves in the new role. Such studies may shed new light on the interactive processes that shape outcomes such as the speed of adaptation, psychological discomfort incurred, and the balance of influence between self and role demands that characterizes the negotiated solution.

Limitations

Given the limitations of two case studies and a theory generation approach, these ideas remain speculative, and tests of the model proposed here will depend on future studies designed to detect process dynamics such as the speed and number of loops among adaptation tasks. Research designs that measure potential antecedents, such as network characteristics and individual attributes, that will shape the contents of repertoires are also needed to refine and test the ideas proposed here.

Caution is particularly needed in generalizing from a small, nonrandomly selected sample. For example, Kilduff and Day (1994) found that high self-monitors were more likely to change jobs and receive promotions, two common types of career transition. Following the logic of arguments made above, the present sample may have inadvertently consisted of people prone to an innovative response in identity construction. My sample might also be biased by the oversampling of female participants, who might differ from their male counterparts in characteristics that I did not measure. I do not consider that these issues pose a threat to the validity of my arguments, however, because this article does not aim to predict process outcomes. Rather, this study identifies conceptually grounded differences in how people in similar situations engage the basic tasks of adaptation. Future studies with larger, random samples might detect a broader set of strategies and offer insight into what attributes predict which approach is chosen and with what success.

Issues pertaining to gender and demographics, while largely beyond the scope of this paper, merit more detailed comment. Although women participants were not randomly selected, and my sample size is too small to make meaningful comparisons in the strategies used by men and women, the women's reports of their transition experiences were consistent with well-established findings on the experiences of majorities and minorities in organizations (Kanter, 1976). In particular, women participants were more likely than men to report difficulties in finding identity matches, to rely on true-to-self strategies, and to report perpetuating provisional selves that they themselves described as inadequate. Future research might combine the ideas suggested here about adaptation tasks with existing theories about the effects of organizational demography on social networks (Ibarra and Smith-Lovin, 1997) to further our understanding of processes that affect the course of women's careers and transition experiences.

Generalization to Other Work Transitions

The process theory proposed here is most apt to generalize to other instances of professional socialization. A number of secondary sources, including the excerpt from *Liar's Poker* that introduced the paper, however, offer supporting evidence for the critical role of experimenting with provisional selves in adapting to new roles as well as the personal and professional transformation that results. These sources sug-

gest that the ideas presented here may also have some applicability to the socialization of newcomers to a profession and to a wider range of occupations beyond the professional services domain. In a vivid example, Lief and Fox (1963: 33) described the transition that medical students experience when they first begin to examine "real" patients:

"Will patients accept me?" students ask. "Should I tell them I'm a doctor or a student?" . . . Students typically employ two primary defenses. One is a grandiose overplaying of their new role. . . . "Some of them carry a doctor's bag with them wherever they go, act with too much authority, even act omnipotent." . . . This mimetic attempt to make like doctors is eventually succeeded by a better balance between detachment and concern. Student role-playing is no longer skin deep; it has become internalized and integrated. . . . If all has gone well, he has successfully passed through the successive stages of aspiring, anxious neophyte, then mimetic identification, then the inner comfort of a professional with detached concern.

Hill (1992: 173–176) described a similar process in the experiences of individual contributors making the transition to their first managerial roles. Not knowing how to act the part of "the manager," they imitated role models only to learn that they had to revise their provisional constructions. As in the present study, mimetic experimentation efforts produced self-discovery and acceptance as well as external responses that helped the new managers revise their behaviors and self-representations. With experience, they developed repertoires including modified "natural styles," routines adapted from role models, and new representations of themselves in their new roles:

I even dressed like him [a favorite boss], to look like an authority figure . . . [he] always kept people up. You enjoyed coming to the office, because he always had fun up his sleeve. I wanted to create that kind of atmosphere. But guess what I found out? I don't have much of a sense of humor and I'm not spontaneous like him. If you have to work at making something funny, it falls flat. I had to come up with another way that fit who I am to create the right office atmosphere. I could keep his concepts but I had to put my own words and form around them. (pp. 173–174)

I tried to adopt a style at first that was a bit of a masquerade. It got me into trouble because I was always confused. I needed to find something that I was more comfortable with, so that I wouldn't be perceived as one thing, but know inside that I was another. The jury is still out on my results. But at last, now I've become a known entity to myself. Things feel more natural. . . . I'm comfortable in my skin and the troops have picked up on the self-confidence that feeling gives me. (p. 176)

These last quotes suggest that similar adaptation processes may characterize transitions into corporate management. But the importance of image and display may be attenuated in contexts and jobs that involve longer-term relationships and in which objective performance indicators are available. Research encompassing a broader range of firms, jobs, and practices is needed to clarify the boundaries of the perspective developed here. Perhaps the provisional model developed here can serve as a guideline for that work.

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APPENDIX: Interview Protocol

1. Tell me about your educational background and when you joined the firm.
2. Tell me about your job.
3. What does it take to be successful and effective in your current job? How is your performance on the job evaluated?
4. What new responsibilities did moving into a [team leader/account manager or senior associate/vice president] role entail?
5. Tell me a bit about your career to date. What are the key events of your years at the firm?
6. Tell me what you see as your strengths and weaknesses.
   In what ways would your boss say you need to develop?
   What are you doing to work on the weaknesses?
7. Which people have played a significant role in your professional development? Who has been most helpful to you in "learning the ropes"?
8. What are your goals as you move forward?